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Humanism as a Way of Life Juliusz Domański's *Lectures on Humanism*

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As far as I know, the first impulse to study history of philosophy from a metaphilosophical perspective, with special attention paid to philosophy as a way of life, came to Juliusz Domański from an author who does not fit into this context at all, namely from Etienne Gilson, a French historian of philosophy. In his book about *Heloise and Abelard*, Gilson briefly refers to Erasmus of Rotterdam, a Renaissance humanist, only to criticize his concept of *Philosophia Christi*. For Gilson, the Erasmian concept seems to be self-contradictory and in conflict with traditional goals and methods of philosophy. Descartes, thomism and Thomistic tradition were especially close to Gilson and to his way of thinking about philosophy. He preferred pure thought of Aquinas and Descartes and its perfect structure to any declarations of various thinkers, including Erasmus, to combine philosophy with “life”. Gilson’s book was published in French in 1938. It was translated into Polish and published in 1956 by the PAX publishing house, where Juliusz Domański worked at the beginning of his academic career.

Gilson’s rejection of the Erasmian concept of *Philosophia Christi* provoked Domański to look at this issue with particular attention. Domański decided to explore this problem thoroughly, and a few years later, in 1960, he published his translation of three essays by Erasmus of Rotterdam. Among them was his famous *Paraclesis, or the Exhortation to Christian Philosophy*. In 1965, Domański published his Polish translation of *Enchiridion, or Handbook of the Christian Soldier*.

In both essays, Erasmus presents his own understanding of the notion of *Philosophia Christi*, which is defined by him in a twofold manner: firstly, Erasmus compares it to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, finding some crucial similarities between them; secondly, he opposes it to scholasticism of medieval thinkers. According to Erasmus, *Philosophia Christi* resembles, to some extent, ancient philosophical practice. In the *Paraclesis*, Erasmus poses the question: “What shall we say to this, that a great part of Christ’s doctrine is to be found in some of the philosophers, notably Socrates, Diogenes, and Epictetus?” On the other hand, for Erasmus, medieval scholasticism is frigid, dry and lifeless. Since ancient philosophers had their avid followers, Christians must all the more follow Christ’s teaching and example. For Erasmus, *Philosophia Christi* is a kind of practical wisdom, a philosophical manner of life, rather than theoretical, academic knowledge. In this way, the Erasmian notion of *Philosophia Christi* turns out to be deeply rooted in the Greek and Roman philosophical *praxis*.

In his recent book titled *Lectures on Humanism*, Juliusz Domański makes Erasmus and his humanism the endpoint of the carefully designed series of lectures on the significance, essence and importance of humanism in the European culture from Greek and Roman antiquity to the Renaissance. This voluminous book, consisting of lectures given to students of the Faculty of Classics, University of Warsaw, in the years 1992–1997, gives its readers a unique opportunity to closely follow the intentions and argumentation of the author. Apart from impressive erudition and in-depth analyses, Domański shares with his readers his own methodological approaches, reinterpretations, as well as various doubts about numerous topics. This way of presenting sources and commenting on them enables the readers not only to see the results of the conducted research but also to go along the whole path, with its obstacles and ramifications, which leads the author to his conclusions. Referring to the title of another book by Domański, namely “The Text as the Presence”, it might be said that readers can follow the text as if they were students listening to real lectures.

The contents of the book are arranged in chronological order. The main figures and historical periods include: Plato, Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, Roman poetry, early Christian thought, Augustine, Boethius, Cassiodorus, *devotio moderna*, medieval scholasticism, Italian and French Renaissance, and Erasmus. This historical account is preceded by sophisticated philological analyses of Greek and Latin equivalents of the term “humanism”. The volume contains a selection of Greek and Latin passages in Polish translation, a bibliography, and three indices: *nominum*, *rerum*, and a list of Greek words. The book can be used as a compendium of history of philosophy

and literature, presented from a particularly inspiring perspective. It makes *Lectures on Humanism* an excellent handbook for students.

As it was mentioned before, Domański's book is inspiring for many reasons. Among others, the work can be read in the context of our current discussions on the status and goals of humanities. Nowadays, there are many attempts to separate research from teaching students at universities, as well as to impose the goals of natural sciences on humanities (e.g. such categories as "scientific discovery" and "novelty" are brought to the fore). Furthermore, quantitative assessment of research has been applied in academia (which approach seems to be taken directly from economics). Domański's book encourages us to review the current opinions on humanities, inasmuch as he explores the roots and growth of the European humanistic reflection. He demonstrates that humanism has always rested on a few pillars: research was developed alongside education, and general philosophical perspective was accompanied by philological abilities and scrutiny.

As Juliusz Domański admits, the term "humanism" is difficult to define. On the one hand, it is represented by philosophical views, in which reflection on human dignity takes the pivotal position. On the other hand, it requires philological skills. Philosophy and philology go hand in hand: "It [i.e. humanism] contains abstract philosophical content as well as technical skills and writing procedures; it is, one might say, as rich and multidimensional as man and human affairs themselves" (p. 10). Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero are key protagonists, who play important roles in the book. Plato's concept of *paideia*, Aristotle's role of *theoria* in human life, and Cicero's *humanitas*, in which philosophy and rhetoric are combined, are the most important points of reference for further analyses in the book. In other place Domański writes:

The name and the concept of humanism are constituted by two components, which are quite loosely connected and not easily harmonized. One is philosophical and can be described as the distinction of human being from all the other beings. The second one refers to a particular type of intellectual and artistic culture, in which the most important place is taken by a thoughtful and artistically refined word (p. 652).

For Domański, it was Plato with his concept of human soul akin to eternal Forms, and Aristotle presenting the philosopher's *theoria* as the most constitutive for human virtue, who made a special impact on the way human dignity was interpreted by subsequent humanists. As for Cicero, he was an exceptionally important figure in the transmission of Greek culture (including philosophy) to the Roman world. Cicero translated numerous Greek texts into Latin and imitated Greek literary examples; however, his

ultimate goal was to outdo Greek achievements. Domański emphasises that a special kind of dialogue, i.e. unending reading and re-reading of fundamental works is crucial for humanistic research and education. To quote Umberto Eco's famous saying: "I used to think each book spoke of the things, divine or human, which remain outside books. Now I realized that, not infrequently, books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves" (*The Name of the Rose*). However, one minor correction would be necessary: there are people who are in between and who make books talk.

When studying the history of reception, Juliusz Domański often puts his reconstructions into the three-step pattern of translation, imitation, and emulation. This triple rhythm of reception shows how one culture can find its place within the context of another culture. Translation cannot be reduced just to languages, because words are rooted in concepts, and they belong to their cultures. Imitation of the best possible models was a predominant category in Greek and Roman education, and was the most obvious method of composing literature. Finally, emulation appeals to the Greek concept of *agon*, or contest, namely striving for perfection. This is the way books, as well as people, talk to each other. Moreover, to capture the complete picture of the book, Domański persuades us that we are not told about a way of talking, but about a special way of living. The ancient paradigm of practising philosophy as a way of life is still vivid in later times. In my opinion, we need to read this book along with other metaphilosophical writings by Juliusz Domański or, at least, we must be aware that that perspective, close to Pierre Hadot's account, is present here as well. It can be exemplified by Erasmus, who combines the competences, of a philologist and philosopher, thus going back to the ancient Greek and Roman educational and cultural paradigm in which philosophy was practised alongside rhetoric. The words of philosophy are directed to individuals, with their emotions and unique experiences. Rhetoric and literary devices are no less important than abstract arguments. All means are needed to achieve the goal, which is to transform students' minds.

To summarize, Plato's paideutic perspective in the context of the eternal Forms, Aristotle's *theoria* as the most essential task human beings can perform, as well as Cicero's respect for thoughtful and refined words, are the fundamental components of humanistic perspective in the European thought. It might be said that humanism is an unending dialogue with our intellectual predecessors and successors. The core question of that dialogue is who are human beings and what is constitutive for them. As Plato writes in his *Republic* "the measure of listening to such discussions is the whole life". Domański enters into a dialogue with our predecessor and teaches us how to continue it. 

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